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## ORAL AND LITERARY FENIAN TALES

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The Fenian cycle ranked as a national epic for both Irish and Scottish Gaels long before James Macpherson tried to construct a fake epic in English prose for the Scottish Highlanders out of elements of some of the ballads. It is hardly necessary to illustrate this with such evidence as the use of the cycle's name, *fiannaíocht*, to cover all heroic storytelling in Ireland, or accounts of Scottish countrymen doffing their bonnets out of respect for the subject-matter of the ballads they were going to chant. The Ulster cycle, which is older and which seems to us to include far more of truly heroic tone, was treated up to the middle of the last century and later, among traditional reciters, as a mere adjunct whose relationship to the matter of Fionn and the Fianna was little understood but known to be subsidiary. Only scholarly research has re-established the primacy of the matter of Cú Chulainn; oral tradition knows nothing about it.

In form, however, the Fenian cycle is nothing like a single epic or even a consistent cycle of poems. Except that it is confined to one language, this 'matter of Ireland' would be more diverse, confused and contradictory even than the Arthurian 'matter of Britain'. It seems as though every member of the poetic caste from the twelfth century to the eighteenth must have tried his hand at composing either a ballad (or two!) or a prose tale about the Fenians, and where he had heard nothing he could use to fill in a gap — a name, a line of descent, the cause of a dispute — each one felt free to

invent, or at any rate to adapt something for himself. Thus there are at least half a dozen contradictory accounts of Fionn mac Cumhaill's own descent, not to mention his relationship to major supporting characters such as Caoilte and Mac Lughach,<sup>1</sup> and characters who in earlier tales are his adversaries turn up in later tales as friends or followers, like Aillén<sup>2</sup> or the Fatha Conán, one of the Fenians in late romances, who seems to derive from the hostile supernatural figure Fothad Canainne.

It is necessary in considering the history of the cycle to define not merely the two categories of narrative in my title, but three: first, written narrative, composed more or less on to paper, though not therefore designed necessarily for solitary silent reading;<sup>3</sup> second, literary narrative, composed by professional *seanchaithe*, historians and storytellers, or poets, but passed on generally though not exclusively in oral forms; and third, folk narrative, told by storytellers or sung by singers with no formal training, which might derive mainly or only in small part from written or literary sources. The distinction is seldom made as clear as it should be. It should be added that all three forms could be varied at will by the transmitter to some degree, for the scribes of Early Modern Irish manuscripts took pleasure in substituting words or phrases from other exemplars, other stories or poems, or their own heads for those in their exemplar.<sup>4</sup> A few Irish scribes of the eighteenth century went so far as to write new sequels to stories they had copied, as well as composing new romances on the traditional pattern.<sup>5</sup> Others seem to have taken complete folktales from oral tradition and recast them to a varying extent in literary language,<sup>6</sup> though with one

1 E. MacNeill, *Duanaire Finn* I, Irish Texts Society (= ITS) Vol. 7, London 1908, xxxii, lii-lviii; G. Murphy, *Duanaire Finn* III, ITS Vol. 43, Dublin 1953, lix, lxxvii, 206, etc.

2 Murphy, *op. cit.*, 197-8.

3 A. Bruford, *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Mediaeval Romances*, Dublin 1969 (= *Béaloidas* 34), 45-7, 55-61.

4 *Ibid.*, 48.

5 *Ibid.*, 50-1.

6 *Ibid.*, 51, 123, 127-9, 136-7, 140-3.

exception<sup>7</sup> it seems that the earlier romancers may have borrowed names, ideas and motifs from folk as well as literary oral tradition, but not whole plots of stories.

The Fenian lays belong to the second class: they were composed in the literary syllabic metres of the later Middle Ages, though perhaps not to the standards required of poets of the first rank, and some of them were probably not written down until they were recorded from oral tradition in the past two centuries. We know that bardic praise-poetry of this period was designed primarily to be learned and chanted publicly by a professional reciter (*reacaire*), not normally its composer, and might or might not then be written down in a manuscript book of poems (*duanaire*) by a scribe, to preserve it for future generations in case it died out in the more highly valued oral tradition. The same scheme of values no doubt applied to narrative ballads, but since their subject-matter was of less ephemeral interest than eulogies of contemporary chieftains, the manuscripts were less necessary.

Prose tales are different: as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> they are too ornate and academic in their language, and their descriptive set-pieces or 'runs' are too varied to have been designed to be learned completely by heart by some sort of *reacaire*, or to be either prompt-book or written record of an improvised performance. Like romances of chivalry in other parts of late medieval Europe, they were probably composed in writing and designed to be read aloud. Manuscript copies of some prose tales circulated throughout the Gaelic-speaking area from Co. Cork to the Hebrides in the seventeenth century, and were still being copied and used for reading aloud to attentive audiences in the farm kitchens of Munster little over a century ago. Since the hearers of such a reading might take away with them the gist of the story and even a good part of its wording if they had the sort of oral memory well attested in recent Gaelic storytellers, the written heroic romances came to circulate alongside international folktales in oral tradition, and inventive narrators freely combined

7 *Eachtra Iollainn Airm dheirg* from AT 301, *ibid.*, 84-5.

8 Bruford, *op. cit.*, 46-7.

elements from both to make new stories.<sup>9</sup>

I have written already<sup>10</sup> of the development in oral tradition of Fenian tales which can be traced to written originals: here I want to consider some of those oral tales where some literary influence is detectable but existing manuscripts cannot provide the only sources. First, however, let us look further at the meaning and atmosphere of the cycle as a whole.

It has generally been argued that the Fenian cycle contains more 'popular' elements than the Ulster cycle, and lays less emphasis on the values of a warrior aristocracy. Some writers, like the late Gerard Murphy, have gone on to suggest that modern folktales may often preserve the original forms of stories which were later made into romances by literary men. For instance, Murphy found it hard to believe that the extraordinarily popular motif of the Fenians being invited to a magic dwelling in which they stick to their seats until released by someone bringing a magic solvent could derive from the single late mediaeval romance *An Bhruidean Chaorthuinn*, 'The Rowantree Hall'. But the relationships between Gaelic romances and folktales provide plenty of examples of such inventions spreading with remarkable speed,<sup>11</sup> and the fact that this motif was known to every storyteller in Gaelic Ireland at the beginning of this century, and brought into practically any Fenian hero tale where it could be fitted in, simply means that it was a good story. It is surely more significant that as in the romance, the heroes are nearly always the literary Fianna, the rescuer is often named as Diarmaid, the remedy he brings is usually the blood of specified persons or animals, and the comic character for whom the remedy runs out so that he has to be pulled free by main force, leaving the skin of his bottom sticking to the seat, is generally named as Conán. Murphy's argument that this part of the story survives in folktales but not in the manuscripts because 'the rump was not so freely spoken of in the halls of the gentry' suggests an anachronistic picture of the Irish aristocracy of the fifteenth century, who seem to

9 *Ibid.*, 55 ff. and *passim*.

10 *Ibid.*, 106-33.

11 *Ibid.*, 14-6, 242-3 and *passim*.

have changed wives almost as often as bed-linen<sup>12</sup> and were not likely to be prudes: as I have pointed out<sup>13</sup> the manuscripts have no inhibitions about mentioning Conán's arse, but Murphy must have been relying on Patrick Pearse's published edition, which omits the relevant phrase in deference to the sensibilities of his own time. It could be added that the 'Fionn agus Lorcan' oral type which Murphy seems to suggest as the original setting for the motif<sup>14</sup> is recognisable in at least one version from Scotland,<sup>15</sup> and does not include this motif – which is far less popular in Scottish oral tradition than in Irish – though a similar introduction with an invitation to a funeral leads to a quite different motif.<sup>16</sup>

But though Murphy's ideas about the relationship between romance and folktale were sometimes wrong, many of the points he made about the earlier traditions lying behind the literary Fenian cycle must be treated with respect. It can be taken as established, for instance, that the name of Fionn himself derives from the Celtic god or divine hero celebrated in such placenames of Roman times as Vindobona, now Vienna.<sup>17</sup> It does not follow, however, that his character in the mediaeval cycle or the plots of the stories have any basis in pagan Irish mythology. Identifying gods can be fun, but it seldom has useful results. Take this argument: Fionn, according to several accounts a descendant of the god Nuadu, is

12 K. Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages*, Dublin 1972, 73-4.

13 Bruford, *op. cit.*, 3-4.

14 Murphy, *op. cit.*, xxiv-xxxiii.

15 The last episode added to Lachlann MacNeill's extended version of 'Leigheas Coise Céin' (Bruford, *op. cit.*, 240) – from Islay, the part of Gaelic Scotland with the closest connections to Ireland.

16 More precisely the hero (Gormshuil, from *Leigheas Coise Céin*, replacing Fionn) is persuaded to engage a new servant when the helper corresponding to Lorcán leaves him, whose only wages are to be that Gormshuil must watch his grave the night he dies. He drops dead as soon as they get home, and Gormshuil watching in the old church is assailed by a 'swelling hag' such as appears in a Scottish local legend derived from the end of AT 303 (Bruford, 'Scottish Gaelic Witch Stories', *Scottish Studies* 11 [1967], 18-9) and saved by his helper summoned with a whistle.

17 Murphy, *op. cit.*, lxxxiv; P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, London 1970, 110.

clearly equivalent in some sense to the Welsh Gwynn son of Nudd, who is called king of the otherworld (Annwn) and in folklore leads the Wild Hunt or hounds of Annwn.<sup>18</sup> But the equivalent to Gwynn as ruler of the underworld and leader of the Wild Hunt in Ireland is the ancestor deity Donn, and Donn is a name given to Fionn's follower Diarmaid, or in later tales to his father: it has therefore been suggested that Diarmaid is simply an avatar of Donn.<sup>19</sup> But if Diarmaid and Fionn are aspects of the same divine figure, what is Fionn doing when he allows his wife Gráinne to elope with his *alter ego* Diarmaid, and then sets off in hot pursuit of himself and ultimately causes his own death? This sort of identification seldom clarifies anything.<sup>20</sup>

In fact Fionn, whatever his origins, is regularly presented in the literature as a mortal man, if an unusually long-lived one — or at least with a long prime to his life: in most of the stories he is an active warrior alongside his own grandson Oscar — and endowed with a limited clairvoyant ability if he chews his famous thumb, but a champion of mortals against those people of the otherworld who as a body include the surviving traditions of the pagan Irish pantheon. (For convenience I will describe these otherworld people, *Tuatha Dé Danann*, *aes síde*, more recently *siobhraigh*, *sídhichean* and the like, hereafter as fairies, though this does not carry with it any implications of sweetness, quaintness or diminutive size, only magical power and danger.) It has been pointed out often enough how Fionn and the Fenians spend much of their time fighting either against fairy opponents or overseas invaders who may be human, supernatural or as often as not a blend of the two. In view of the consistently dual treatment of the Gaelic otherworld as an overseas 'land of youth' and an underground realm there is no need to see any significant

18 Mac Cana, *loc. cit.*; I. Foster, Appendix G to Murphy, *op. cit.*, 198-204. See Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, Oxford 1962, 203-4, for Donn as rider in the sky as well as leader of the Fairy Host in recent belief.

19 Mac Cana, *op. cit.*, 113.

20 If Fionn is really a god of the dead, though, it would explain the tradition of his smell of death mentioned by Dáithí Ó hÓgáin in his paper below.

difference in kind between the two sorts of attackers, though later concepts of the overseas invader were certainly influenced by the reality of the Vikings. It has not, I think, been pointed out how closely the main situations in these tales reflect those in modern fairy legends, themselves localised relics of an earlier mythology which have continued to be believed and to terrify country people of all ages until recent times. Leaving aside those tales which represent the Fenians as giants, usually comic giants – partly because Daithí Ó hÓgáin deals with them at some length, (see below p. 211 ff.) and partly because they mainly represent a burlesque stratum of tradition which, like most origin legends in developed societies, was rarely taken entirely seriously – the most frequent themes in prose and verse are (1) battles with fairies or invaders; (2) ‘helper-tales’, in which a mysterious person with magical powers helps the Fenians against other hostile beings; (3) the abduction of a woman by a fairy or foreigner; (4) the appearance of another sort of mysterious stranger who either makes fools of the Fenians, or lures them to a world overseas or in (5) a *bruidhean*, a fairy dwelling where they are imprisoned and threatened with death; (6) the Fenians may also, like Cú Chulainn, be enlisted by one band of fairies to fight another. Direct battles are not appropriate to the small-scale encounters of modern fairy legend, and helpful fairies, though they appear in local legend, are more typical of international *Märchen*; but the other situations are closely paralleled in the legends. The abducted woman, usually but not always rescued from the fairy host, is a theme almost as important as the infant changeling in local tradition; tales of leprechauns, uruisgs and other solitary fairies making fools of mortals abound, and the way the Fenians are carried overseas by the Giolla Deacair’s horse is the same way in which children may be carried into a loch by a water-horse, unable to get off its back; the man enticed to join the dance in a fairy hill, or the woman kept there and forced to bake for the fairies, is in very much the same position as the Fenians in a *bruidhean*; and there are plenty of tales of young men carried off by the fairy host, not to fight battles for them, but to take their part in a hurling or shinty match.

The mortal characters in fairy legends are essentially



ordinary people, neighbours or ancestors of those who tell about them, and the role of the Fenians in the more literary tales is very similar. Far from being giants with superhuman strength, they are threatened by outside forces and win with difficulty (or there would be no story worth telling). They enjoy the simple life of hunters — though I will be qualifying this phrase shortly — because they are not courtiers but paid soldiers: very well paid by some later accounts in terms of the dues they claimed in land, game rights, and other tribute of a feudal nature almost up to *jus primae noctis*.<sup>21</sup> They are regularly represented as being in conflict with the king they serve, Cormac mac Airt, and the end of the cycle comes when Cormac's son Cairbre Lifechair tries to withdraw some of their rights and is killed in battle by the mutinous Fenians. In some ways Fionn is more like Robin Hood than King Arthur, though he is closer to the earliest concept of Arthur as a war-leader who is not a king, and the aristocratic Gaels would have had no truck with Robin's idea of robbing the rich to feed the poor. Nevertheless Fionn, as an independent and disaffected army leader, belonging according to some genealogists to a vassal tribe — I doubt if we have any right to brush off MacNeill's contention on this point as cavalierly as Murphy tried to do<sup>22</sup> — represents an opposition to the aristocracy such as in practice hardly ever existed in early Ireland, save perhaps for a very few successful clerics of low birth. In this sense at least the Fenian cycle is more popular: its heroes are not all kings' sons such as hold the centre of the stage in practically all other later Gaelic hero tales.<sup>23</sup>

But despite undercurrents of rebellion the Fenians are consistently represented as an army defending Ireland as a whole on behalf of the king of all Ireland. This too has very little to do with history: no major battle in Irish history, even Clontarf, has not involved Irishmen fighting on both sides.

21 Many tales mention these and they are cited as the cause of the Battle of Gabhair which put an end to the Fenians, but it is difficult to find an accessible version in print: I can now refer to J.F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, Berkeley 1985, 53-4. See also Cecile O'Rahilly, ed., *Cath Finntrágha*, Dublin 1962, 24.

22 Murphy, *op. cit.*, 212.

23 Bruford, *op. cit.* (1969), 23.

But it has a lot to do with the creation of the concept of an Irish nation. Fionn has certain tribal links in early sources with Leinster and possibly Meath, but his followers and their adventures are connected with every province of Ireland, though perhaps less with Ulster, which already had its own older, more aristocratic matter for stories.<sup>24</sup> From quite early in the Middle Irish period the Fenians are shown in the service of the king of Tara, Cormac, the legendary culture hero of the Uí Néill dynasties.<sup>25</sup> It is surely significant that the burgeoning of Fenian matter, both in the form of written prose and of literary ballads which may have taken centuries to reach the written page, coincides with the period from the tenth century to the twelfth when the doctrine that the king of Tara had regularly been high-king of Ireland was being developed by historians, and a *de facto* high-kingship of Ireland was from time to time briefly established by various provincial kings.<sup>26</sup> Fianna of the various provinces are mentioned occasionally, but Fionn's men are regularly called *Fianna Éireann*, (or *Fianna Fáil!*), 'Fenians of Ireland', not Fenians of Tara.

The first stimulus to the idea of Irish nationhood came no doubt from the Viking raids of the ninth and tenth centuries, but the exaggeration of the Norse threat in *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, 'The War between Gaels and Vikings', is merely designed to glorify Brian Bóramha and his dynasty, and hardly reflects the attitudes of eleventh-century Ireland where most Norsemen were merchants rather than warriors. One of the few real Norse names used for invaders in the cycle, Maghnus, comes from the campaign of Magnus Barelegs at the end of that century, but as many of the Fenians' attackers come from more or less fictitious kingdoms such as Sorcha or Ioruaidh as from the definitely Scandinavian Lochlann. It

24 Even the Ulster cycle includes episodes set in all the provinces, though since Connacht and next to it Cú Roi's West Munster are most prominent, it makes all the more sense for the rival cycle to centre on Leinster and Tara.

25 For this view of Cormac see T. Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt*, Dublin 1977.

26 Murphy, *op. cit.*, lx-lxi; F.J. Byrne, *The Rise of the Uí Néill and the High-Kingship of Ireland*, O'Donnell Lecture XIII, Dublin 1969.

seems likely that the second wave of *Gaill* to hit Ireland, the Norman invasion, really precipitated the consciousness of nationhood: the realisation that the Gaels as a race were threatened was the ideal stimulus to produce a national epic. By the later Middle Ages even the enemies in many earlier tales, the fairies, join the Fenians to fight off the invading 'King of the World' in the romance *Cath Finntrágha*, 'The Battle of Ventry';<sup>27</sup> the Tuatha Dé Danann were after all Irish fairies, and despite the historians' depiction of them as a race defeated by the ancestors of the Gaels, there may well have been a lingering belief in them as Ireland's former gods.

The shape and feel of the cycle are generally agreed to have been established about the time of the coming of the Normans in *Agallamh na Senórach* (conventionally rendered 'The Colloquy of the Ancients', but it is seldom that pompous: 'The Old Fogeys' Ramblings' might be nearer the mark). Older traditions there certainly were, but it is hard to believe that much of the setting and atmosphere of literary or indeed any *fiannaíocht* as we know it goes back far beyond the *Agallamh*. It surely established the convention that the tales were told by the aged Fenians, Oisín and Caoilte, who had seen them all happen,<sup>28</sup> to St Patrick himself, who significantly keeps

27 C. O'Rahilly, *op. cit.*, 11-3, 48-50. Scottish oral tradition may localise the scenes of events, but normally unlike Macpherson acknowledges Ireland as the Fenians' home ground; it was probably the Normanisation of the Scottish crown under the sons of Malcolm Canmore which provoked Scottish Gaels to revert to thinking of Ireland as the 'Old Country', and this has never been lost. The hero of a Scottish Gaelic folktale is far more likely to be son of the king of Ireland (*mac Rígh Éireann*) than son of the king of Scotland. But some may think of the Fenians as Scottish: the late Donald Sinclair, Tíree, thought that Goll was different from the rest because he was an Irishman (School of Scottish Studies (SA) tape SA 1968/26 B8).

28 The implied rules of evidence, so to speak, prefer an eye-witness account written down from dictation (oral transmission was not regarded as accurate) and so the *Táin* is dictated by Fergus mac Roích raised from his grave (R. Thurneysen, *Die Irische Helden- und Königsage*, Halle 1921, 252-67). The historians set the scene of the Ulster cycle too long before writing to allow the heroes to survive, so one has to be revived by 'fasting against him'.

on calling on his scribe Brocán to write them down;<sup>29</sup> both the eye-witness account and the written record gave authority to a story at this date. We will come back to Patrick and his books later. But the *Agallamh* is also a turning-point for the whole ethos of the cycle, if only because its author tried to fit together the disparate traditions about the Fenians he knew. The pastoral element, the praise of nature and the chase, is something quite foreign to earlier heroic literature: if Cú Chulainn sees a strange bird he tries to kill it, rather than writing poems about it. The *Agallamh* incorporates pastoral poems which seem to come from what has been called 'hermit poetry', praising the beauty and peace of nature and living creatures in a way more appropriate for contemplative clerics than active warriors or even hunters. It is not the first source to put such poems into the mouths of the Fianna,<sup>30</sup> but from then on the pastoral element crops up, though sporadically, in the prose as well. It may indeed be worth suggesting that it was the attribution of nature poetry to the Fenians which allowed Scottish hunters and game-keepers like Domhnall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dàn or Duncan Bàn Macintyre to write about the peaceful joys of the deer-forest in the same vein, which has fewer reflections in modern Irish verse.

What sort of hunters were the Fenians? The early fragmentary references may give a picture of solitary trappers going out on their own to bring in game and skins for their own use — Fionn and his son 'Oiséne' meet at the latter's solitary camp-fire and fail to recognise each other<sup>31</sup> — but in the later romances and ballads, convention seems to demand the full paraphernalia of an Irish royal hunt, with hounds and beaters rousing the game from the coverts and driving it past huntsmen who sit in their butts or hunting-mounds (*dumha*

29 S.H. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, London 1892, I, 107, 113, 117, 222, etc.

30 See K.H. Jackson, *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry*, Cambridge 1935, 41-4, 172-5: Jackson argues that these earlier, mostly seasonal poems, as well as later Fenian lore, have a different character from the ascetic hermit poems.

31 Murphy, *op. cit.*, lv, quoting K. Meyer, *Fianaigecht*, Dublin 1910, 24 ff.

*seilge*),<sup>32</sup> just waiting for deer and other animals to come by and be shot or speared. This betrays the pastoral fallacy: with all that racket going on you would not have much chance to stop and listen to a blackbird singing. Nor is this the pleasure of simple country folk: each of the Fenians is represented as keeping a pair of hounds of his own,<sup>33</sup> and with the pay of extra huntsmen and beaters, it would be a costly and aristocratic form of sport, much like the more solitary deerstalking which is taken as the ideal pursuit for a gentleman in later Scottish Gaelic verse. In fact it is just what off-duty soldiers might do, like tiger-hunting in India, and fits well with the representation of the Fenians as a standing army.

The standing army is another anachronism. From the thirteenth century on some mediaeval Irish chieftains kept small bands of mercenaries, mostly Hebridean galloglasses to fight their wars for them,<sup>34</sup> but they were unpopular as an imposition on the tenants who had to pay their quartering (*buannacht*) and appear in an unfavourable light generally in literature: I have argued elsewhere that the word *amhus*, 'mercenary', has gone steadily downhill since the author of *Eachtra Chonaill Ghulban* depicted one band as coarse, ferocious creatures who speedily became ogres when the episode was used by folk narrators.<sup>35</sup> A substantial national standing army of patriotic Irishmen is quite another matter, and such a thing never really existed. It would be tempting to see the whole idea as an extrapolation backwards from the legend of the sleeping warriors who one day will awake to save the country in her hour of need, save that the Fenians are better known in this role in Scotland than in Ireland. Even if as I have suggested the nationalism is a secondary addition, there is still no evidence for substantial bands of wandering 'hunter-warriors' in early Christian Ireland. It is

32 O'Grady, *op. cit.*, 258-9, 306, illustrate the pattern.

33 Murphy, *op. cit.*, civ, and poems cited there: Murphy's modern parallels mention 'small farmers' and 'townsman' keeping harriers, not poor countrymen, and the deerhounds of the Fenians would surely have been larger and finer dogs.

34 Nicholls, *op. cit.*, 87-90.

35 Bruford, *op. cit.* (1969), 15; cf. Murphy, *op. cit.*, 177, n. 4.

difficult to fit the idea into the network of tribal territories with all action initiated by some member of the hierarchy of over-kings and under-kings which seems to constitute the historians' official concept of the period, though it could have some basis in the period of conquest, conflict and migration before the coming of Christianity and reliable annals, when large war-bands from Ireland raided Britain, settled in Scotland and conquered half of Ulster for the Uí Néill. This is after all where the early historians chose to set the cycle; but no doubt Zimmer's theory of Norse origin is right to the extent that the arrival of wandering war-bands of Vikings in the ninth century reminded the Irish that such things could exist.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the Fenians are a combination of a memory of a former age like this, a euhemerised version of the Wild Hunt or the fairy host, and — by all means — Joseph Nagy's concept of a fossilised adolescent peer-group, boy scouts who like Peter Pan won't grow up and leave the camp-fire to live in houses (see Nagy below, p. 161 ff). But certainly what has been made out of these elements is a fictional construct, made to tell stories about, with no more basis in fact than the vast company of wandering bards which inflicted itself on the historical king Guaire in the story of the finding of the *Táin*.

This fictional patriotic army remains paradoxically disaffected and even downright rebellious to its king Cormac,<sup>37</sup> and torn by internal dissension which ranges from bickering to blood-feud, since Fionn's first lieutenant Goll is also his father's killer by some accounts. Conflict is necessary to a good epic and even the nostalgia of the *Agallamh* is tempered with a little tragedy, but the theme of the elopement of Diarmaid and Gráinne would really have provided all that was needed: it sets even Oisín against his own father Fionn, and

36 *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 35 (1891), 1 ff. and 252 ff.

37 Not only are Fenians regularly reported as the killers of Cairbre Lifechar, king of Ireland, in the battle of Gabhair, but a Scottish ballad (J.F. Campbell, *Leabhar na Feinne*, London 1872, 141-2) has his father Cormac being killed by them in a dispute over a woman with Oisean. On the other hand Kennedy's prose (*ibid.*, 185) takes Cairbre to be a usurper of Cormac's throne, not his heir.

leads to the final unconnected tragedy just as surely as the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere leads to the death of Arthur. The internal conflict is more stressed in literary than folk narratives; so indeed is the constant tension with the king. The Fenians are not outlaws, but above and beyond the law, powerful enough to unseat the king who pays them and often out of his reach. This is perhaps an alternative reaction to the same situation which produced the nationalism: the Fianna are the army of Ireland, but the only king claiming to rule all Ireland that the late mediaeval writers knew was the king of England, and Cormac is treated with as much loyalty as they felt to him. In fact the Hiberno-Norman barons of the fifteenth century often were as independent of the Crown as the Fenians, so this is not entirely wish-fulfilment, but there is an obvious change of attitude from the Ulster tales where the idea of high-kingship is either ignored or treated as elective. Folktales tend to simplify the situation by calling Fionn himself a king.

One other feature which belongs firmly to the literary side of the cycle is characterisation. This is mostly pretty elementary — comedy of humours rather than comedy of manners — and only a few characters are established: the *jeune premier* Oscar, Diarmaid the great lover, Conán the sarcastic and savage (who tends to degenerate in later tales into a boastful buffoon), Caoilte the swift and playful, Fionn the ageing leader with prophetic powers. Goll, developed in some ballads as an alternative hero, has his smouldering feud with Fionn but little individual character, and even Oisín, perhaps a bit more thoughtful than most as a poet, has no very distinct personality before his arguments with St Patrick. There is enough there, however, to add interest to the dialogue or a comic interlude between battles, and individual authors could assign traits of personality as well as special skills to established or invented names when they wanted more. Most seem to have been content with by-play between Conán and Diarmaid for light relief, and this has carried over into the oral tradition, which deals with the characters in its own way but does not, I think, add to their number.

So what elements in Fenian folktales are really folk elements? Some can be recognised by the way they distort

the heroic/pastoral ambience of the literary tales. Fionn as a comic giant pretending to be his own baby in a cradle and biting the finger of a visiting giant clearly belongs to a different world, and I know of no evidence for the story before the eighteenth century: the first instance seems to be from Scotland, though the story has hardly been known there since, and the collector felt that it had been made up to discredit the ancient heroes.<sup>38</sup> The fact that either the giant in the cradle or his visitor may alternatively be named as Cú Chulainn — originally the small young hero *par excellence* — shows how little the story has to do with Fenian or any other literature.

Other elements may have arisen in folk tradition because Gaelic society and attitudes have changed since the Middle Ages. Diarmaid's *ball seirce*, the magic love spot which makes any woman who sees it fall in love with him, is not in the romance (cf. Ó hÓgáin below, p. 227 ff.) or any of the older tradition because it is not needed. In Old Irish tales, possibly founded on pagan myth, though not uninfluenced by monastic distrust of the daughters of Eve, a woman often takes the initiative in an elopement with the assurance of a conquering goddess: Deirdre in the older version of her story, *Longes mac n-Uislenn*, forces Naoise to carry her off from her husband-to-be by threatening to shame him, and Gráinne uses magic and the same sort of blackmail to make Diarmaid take her in the same way. Modern storytellers are not conditioned to accept this sort of behaviour or to put any blame on a woman — unless she is a witch or a supernatural hag — so they introduce the magical motif to absolve Gráinne of blame. The idea has reached Scotland as well as Ireland, but as part of this story at least I do not think it can be very old. The same cannot be said of the alternative end to the story, where Diarmaid is not simply killed by the boar of Benbulbin, as in the romance, but kills it first and only gets his death-wound from a venomous bristle that runs into his foot when Fionn asks him to measure the body with his bare feet. Apart from the memories of Achilles and Adonis that it stirs, the

38 *Ibid.*, 7.



episode survives in folk memory mainly on the periphery, in Scotland and Co. Cork, whereas the more straightforward account in the romance seems to have taken over in between. But in any case this is hardly a folk motif, since it features prominently in the ballad form of the story, 'Laoidh Dhiarmaid', which is now known mainly from Scotland but may have been composed by a poet who used the literary metres about the same time as the surviving prose romance – and Scotland and Co. Cork also preserve most of the folktales that reflect written originals most closely. The motif functions to increase Diarmaid's status, making him almost invulnerable and only to be killed by a treacherous trick, and if he is originally a god it may well be part of the original story, dropped by the romancer because there is nothing very heroic about it.

Another social element in Irish and a few Scottish folktales is the exploitation of the obligations connected with death and funerals, important in all Celtic societies but particularly in the small communities of the recent Gaeltachts. An invitation to a funeral was a particularly binding social obligation, so in the Lorcán story mentioned above it is used to entice the Fenians into the *bruidhean*: in the Scottish parallel the invitation is actually to watch the grave the night after the funeral. Similarly in an episode found in versions of 'Céadach' and other tales when the hero has killed one monster the least he can do is to honour its dying request to take the news of its death to another creature, which of course instantly attacks him to avenge its friend, and, when he kills it, in its turn makes a similar dying request.

This story of Céadach is one where it is very hard to tell literary from folk elements. Hundreds of versions have been recorded in Ireland, and a fair number in Scotland: next to the *Bruidhean Chaorthainn*, or rather its central motif of sticking to the seats, it is probably the most popular of all Fenian tales. It cannot possibly have spread from the late Munster Ms version of which only four texts survive, which in any case is evidently a written-down version of the folktale with a perfunctory end, and some would-be literary touches added by the scribe.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand there are

39 Bruford, *op. cit.* (1969), 123-6.

fuller folk versions from both Ireland and Scotland with elements that seem too complex for pure folktale. For instance the story often begins with a scene in which Céadach, the hero, wins a bride who follows him rather than a rival suitor: he joins the Fenians to escape from this rival who nonetheless catches up and kills him towards the end of the story. It is not typical of folktale construction to have such a character waiting in the wings throughout the greater part of the story, and the Munster Ms and a few other versions leave out this introduction and have Céadach killed by an unknown assailant. This structure and the hero's constant name, among other features, suggest an earlier literary origin, very possibly a lost written romance, which need not be much older than the sixteenth century in order to have succeeded in generating an oral story which is now of such popularity.<sup>40</sup> To the literary references from the fifteenth to the early nineteenth century to a Céadach as one of the Fenians which I have collected in my book<sup>41</sup> I can add a mention of him as a fallen Fenian in a poem in *Duanaire Finn* which Murphy dated as thirteenth-century,<sup>42</sup> though he is given a conventional epithet, *fear go n-aoibh*, 'happy man' or 'handsome man', which gives no indication of his history.

The end of the Céadach story seems certainly more like folktale than literary romance: after a shape-changing battle in mid-air — a possible mediaeval element if, as in some folk versions, both rivals first met as students of magic with Manannán — the two opponents kill each other, but Céadach is resurrected often by his wife copying the actions of birds she watches. This is a commonplace of international *Märchen*; alternatives are a borrowing of the *Bruidhean Chaorthuinn* cure with blood, or a confusion with another common resurrection motif, the 'Everlasting Fight', which could be closest to the literary original if any.<sup>43</sup> Still, it is hard to avoid won-

40 *Ibid.*, 126-7.

41 *Ibid.*, 123.

42 MacNeill, *op. cit.*, 48 (lay XIX, verse 14); Murphy, *op. cit.*, 42.

43 Bruford, *op. cit.* (1969), 126 and note 27. The motif of resurrection by copying animals is said by Stith Thompson (*Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, Copenhagen 1955-8, motif B. 512) to be most usual of serpents, but birds are not uncommon in Gaelic variants as far as I know.

dering why in a whole group of versions the way to resurrect the hero is shown by birds, he and his rival kill each other in mid-air in bird form, and the rival's name is Londubh, 'Black-bird'. It is possible that this complex of bird symbols was prompted by the coincidence of the mid-air fight and the resemblance of Céadach's name to *céirseach*, a bird often associated with the *londubh*<sup>44</sup> in poetry and lore; there is even a name not unlike Londubh which could have been used for this character in the original romance, if there was one.<sup>45</sup> But the blackbird in Fenian lore has in any case a meaning which seems to go beyond the tuneful songster of the grove in nature-poetry, though of course this aspect of the bird is noticed too.

It is probably a red herring, this blackbird, but it is curious how its name keeps on cropping up in Fenian lore. It is natural enough that a character called Fionn, 'fair', tends to have opponents called Dubh, 'black': one of the earliest of all references to a character called Find who was a hunter and warrior is in the Latin verse text of the puzzle-tale still told in Gaelic about Fionn and Dubhan, in a ninth-century Continental Ms,<sup>46</sup> and his opponent there is called Dub — though they are no more than personified black and white counters there. But the *lon* element on its own is used for opponents and monsters too — 'a dreadful beast called Lun' in a Fenian folktale collected in the last century,<sup>47</sup> or the blackbird whose shank is bigger than a deer's leg which Oisín catches in the story of his last hunt: we will return to this presently, but here it is worth noting that there is a ghost word in Scottish Gaelic dictionaries, *lon*, 'elk' (extended by Forbes to cover

44 Bruford, *op. cit.* (1969), 124-5 and n. 12; but *céirseach* is feminine and means either a female blackbird or a thrush, associated with the blackbird in the manner of Robin Redbreast and Jenny Wren.

45 An Dubhlaoch, one of the main opponents of Céadach in the late romance *Eachtra na gCuradh* (ed. Meadhbh Ní Chléirigh, Baile Átha Cliath 1941) — but the name is roughly equivalent to 'the Black Knight', as conventional a villain-name as you can get.

46 G. Murphy, 'The Puzzle of the Thirty Counters', *Béaloideas* 12 (1942), 23-8.

47 Murphy, *op. cit.* (1953), xix.

moose and buffalo),<sup>48</sup> which seems to derive solely from the lexicographers' refusal to believe in this blackbird bigger than a modern deer — so the word had to mean something else, why not the extinct elk whose bones were sometimes dug up in the bogs? One can see their point — why a blackbird? If it were just for the incongruity, like the hunted wren which needs to be brought back in a wagon in French ritual and Anglo-Scots song,<sup>49</sup> why not a wren, which is smaller and has undoubted mythical significance as 'King of the Birds' and midwinter sacrifice? Perhaps it had to be something that was not taboo at other times — but were small birds like blackbirds fair game in early Ireland, or does our present distaste for Italian thrush-hunters (like that for French horse-butchers) have deep roots? In any case there is greater incongruity in the name of Fionn's sword, Mac an Luin, which the lexicographer seems to accept as meaning 'son of the blackbird'.<sup>50</sup> The ballad of the Smithy, 'Duan na Ceardaich', explains that it was made by a supernatural blacksmith named Lon mac Liobhainn in Scottish versions, Lon mac Liomhtha in *Duanaire Finn*.<sup>51</sup> Except in the *Duanaire* the ballad is known almost exclusively from Scottish oral tradition, where it has remained enormously popular especially as a chant for New Year guisers going round the houses,<sup>52</sup> but its plot has been collected as a prose story in

48 A.R. Forbes, *Gaelic Names of Beasts . . . etc.*, Edinburgh 1905, 13, 70, 158: see also *ibid.*, 246, for a saying in which the blackbird is again strangely masterful, 'supposed by some to refer to either the Roman or Scandinavian invader.'

49 E.A. Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds*, London 1958, 147-9.

50 Royal Irish Academy, *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, s.v. '1 lon'. The quantity seems to rule out the similar *luin*, 'lance', associated with Celtchar and other heroes.

51 No. XXXVI. Mac Liomhtha, 'Son of Whetting', is an appropriate name for a sword-smith, and it may well be that the Scottish name has been assimilated to placenames such as Loch Leven (Liobhainn).

52 At least in the Uists, where most versions have been collected recently. Is it a coincidence that the ballad was used at the time of year traditional for wren hunts?

Ireland and the Isle of Man;<sup>53</sup> it is in a literary metre and dated by Murphy c.1400 on its language<sup>54</sup> – this is literary tradition of some antiquity. Why call a rather ogre-like blacksmith ‘blackbird’? Or, as O’Rahilly turned the *bolg* of the Fir Bolg from a bag into a lightning-god,<sup>55</sup> should we look for a second meaning for *lon*?

I have illustrated the dangers of the name game already, and before I find myself suggesting that blackbirds are a ‘multiform’ of wrens, I had better leave this game for someone else to finish if they dare. Time also forbids me going into some other anomalous prose tales, such as *Bodach an Chóta Lachtna*, ‘The Churl in the Drab Coat’, where the late Irish Ms version is paralleled by Scottish folktales which put Murchadh son of Brian in place of Fionn and seem to have links with another late Irish manuscript tale, seemingly made out of a folktale, *Giolla an Fhiugha*, ‘The Servant with the Billhook’.<sup>56</sup> Ignorance forbids me to meddle with the Fenian lays, and I want to end by considering two points in folktales at the beginning and end of the whole cycle.

The stories of Fionn’s birth and young days have been dealt with by others (see Ó hÓgáin, Nagy below), and I want to consider only one element in them where oral tradition has more to say than the literature, the story of how Fionn got his ‘thumb of knowledge’, which he had only to chew or lay below his upper teeth – folktale tellers make much more of a meal of it than literary texts<sup>57</sup> – for clairvoyant insight. (I can remember no account which specifies which thumb it is: the stories of its origin suggest the right, if Fionn was right-handed, but it is an odd ambiguity.) I am not concerned with

53 Murphy, *op. cit.* (1953), 86-7 lists prose versions from Ireland and one in very corrupt verse from Co. Donegal (*Gaelic Journal* 11, 137-8); for the Manx version see A.W. Moore, *The Folk-Lore of the Isle of Man*, Douglas 1891, 27-9 (from Train’s collection: King Olave Goddardson replaces Fionn and Caoilte).

54 *Op. cit.* (1953), 85.

55 T.F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Dublin 1946, 43-57.

56 Bruford, *op. cit.* (1969), 129, 142-3.

57 *Ibid.*, 219 and n. 27.

what is generally seen as an older explanation, in which the thumb was caught in the closing door of a fairy dwelling,<sup>58</sup> but with the story still popular in oral tradition that he got the power by being the first to taste a salmon he was cooking for someone else, because he used the relevant thumb to press down a blister that rose on the fish's skin and then put it in his mouth to cool it.<sup>59</sup> This is obviously a variant of an international tale, which though it has been catalogued as AT 673, 'The White Serpent's Flesh' in the *Types of the Folktale* is a legend rather than a *Märchen*.<sup>60</sup> The standard European type in which the hero acquires magic or healing powers from being first to taste the flesh of a snake he is cooking for his master is certainly known in Scotland if not Ireland, told of St Fillan (Faolan), Michael Scot and the founder of the Beaton family of physicians among others.<sup>61</sup> Another version is associated in the Icelandic *Völsunga saga* with Sigurd, the

58 Murphy, *op. cit* (1953), 55. The accidental nature of the gift is in keeping with modern fairy legend again.

59 The blister does not appear in *Macgnímartha Find* (ed. K. Meyer, *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881-3), 195-204) but is stressed in many folk versions: the power may be seen as residing in the juice of the cooked fish rather than its skin, as Norse parallels mention the blood of the dragon's heart. The healing power of a drink from Fionn's hands mentioned in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (ed. Neasa Ní Shéaghdha, ITS 48, Dublin 1967, 90, 1. 1575) is ascribed there to his handling of the (whole?) salmon: compare the healing gift in the international folktale.

60 It is not clear which of the versions listed by S. Ó Súilleabháin and R.Th. Christiansen, *The Types of the Irish Folktale*, *FF Communications* 188, Helsinki 1963 under AT 673 are versions of the Fionn tale, which of the other tradition noted in the heading told of Carroll O'Daly, or whether any mention the snake. Since Scottish versions may set the snake incident in another country Ireland's lack of snakes would not prevent the tale being told. Investigation proves in fact that some of the versions listed are in fact mere accounts of Fionn's thumb of knowledge, with no description of how he got it: the three references to *Béaloidas* 7 are all of this sort.

61 D.A. MacDonald and A. Bruford, *Scottish Traditional Tales*, Edinburgh 1974, 96-7; W. Grant Stewart, *The Popular Superstitions and Festive Amusements of the Highlanders of Scotland* (new ed. London 1851), 53-6; J.F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, new ed., London 1890-3, Vol. 2, 377-83.

Volsung, who slew the dragon Fáfnir and roasted its heart for his adviser Regin the smith, but burned his fingers on it, licked them, and was at once able to understand the birds which were talking of Regin's plans to kill him. The saga itself is no earlier than the fourteenth century, but the incident is depicted on two Manx crosses of the late tenth or early eleventh centuries.<sup>62</sup> The roasting of the heart alone merely reflects the size of the dragon, depicted on another Manx cross simply as a huge snake. Snakes are long-established symbols of knowledge and especially healing in Europe, but unknown in Ireland: salmon, especially Boyne salmon as in *Macgnímartha Finn*, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Finn', were symbols of knowledge and poetic or prophetic inspiration in Ireland, and would be obvious substitutes for the snake. But these arguments work equally well in the other direction, and the Irish story might possibly be archetype for the European legend.

One development in folk tradition may throw some light on the relationship between the Fionn and Sigurd stories. The knowledge acquired by the taster of the white snake is generally a gift of healing or clairvoyance which lasts for life but has no immediate application, and is normally available without a recapitulation of putting the burnt finger in the mouth (though some Scottish versions borrow this detail from Fionn). For Sigurd and for Fionn in most of the folktales, however, the knowledge immediately tells them that the man who set them to cook heart or salmon and who intended to taste it first is an enemy. Regin is plotting to kill Sigurd — he is in fact the dragon's brother — and the man who caught Fionn's salmon and set him to cook it is either planning to

62 P.M.C. Kermode, *Manx Crosses*, London 1907, 170-7. In discussion of this paper by Rory McTurk and H.R.E. Davidson it was pointed out that this episode is also told in the Eddic lay *Fáfnismál* (prose following strophe 31 and strophes 32 ff.; H. Kuhn, ed., *Edda*, Heidelberg 1962, 186-8. These references are older than the saga probably, but not now agreed to be older than the crosses. Kermode's dating of these (*op. cit.* 179-80) is a century later than that given in the text, which follows A.M. Cubbon's booklet *The Art of the Manx Crosses*, Douglas 1971, 26-9.

kill Fionn, or in most Scottish and perhaps a few Irish versions Fionn is bound to kill him, for he is the man who killed Fionn's father Cumhall.<sup>63</sup> In the *Macgnímartha* he is a druid who like the doctor in the serpent tales wants the knowledge for himself, but accepts quietly that he is not fated to have it and bestows his own name upon Fionn. In oral versions of the tale of Fionn's youthful deeds there is a revenge element which rounds off the story much more satisfactorily, and in some versions Fionn finds out by his newly acquired powers where his father's sword, with which he was killed, is hidden, and kills the killer with it.<sup>64</sup> It is not impossible for loose ends to be tied up in this way in the course of oral transmission:<sup>65</sup> the resemblance to the Sigurd motif, however, must raise the question whether this oral tradition may not represent an older if not the oldest form of the episode.

A curiously primitive element in these Scottish versions has only come to my notice since I started to write this paper. Modern storytellers refer to the catcher of the salmon (or more often trout) who had killed Cumhall as *Arca Dubh*, 'Black Arca', and this name or something very close to it<sup>66</sup> appears in most of the Scottish versions that give him a name, back to one written in Mull in 1803. Another black opponent for Fionn is no surprise, but the word *arca* is not to be found

63. J.F. Campbell, *op. cit.* (1890-3), 352-3; *op. cit.* (1872), 37-8; J.G. Campbell, *The Fianns. Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition* 4, London 1891, 20 and 26; A. MacLellan, *Stories from South Uist*, trans. J.L. Campbell, London 1961, 8-9; *Scottish Studies* 1 (1957), 205-10; IFC Ms 1029, 296-305 (Barra); at least eight other storytellers from S. Uist, Barra, Vatersay and Tiree have recorded versions with this element for the School of Scottish Studies.

64 The sword (sometimes named as Mac a' Luin) appears in a majority of the recordings, the manuscript and published versions cited except J.F. Campbell, *op. cit.* (1890) (killing and finding sword not connected?) and the two in *The Fianns* (fisher killed with his own rod; torn asunder). Cf. *Béaloides* 3 (1931-2), 187-95, where Fionn kills the giant who has his father's sword, though Goll is named as Cumhall's killer.

65 Bruford, *op. cit.* (1969), 236-7.

66 Forca in J.F. Campbell, *op. cit.* (1872); Arcan in J.F. Campbell, *op. cit.* (1890-3, Vol. 2); Arcai in J.G. Campbell, *op. cit.*; Arca or Arcaidh in all modern versions cited in n. 63.



in dictionaries, and I was driven to wonder whether there could be a connection with *erc* or *orc*, poetic names for a salmon. However my colleague D.A. MacDonald tells me that in Uist *arca* is a word still used for the vagina of a cow or other large animal, and the late Donald Alasdair Johnson, a remarkable South Uist storyteller, once recorded an explanation for the name which in other cases he only hinted at.<sup>67</sup> Arca Dubh had been expelled from the Fenians for bestiality with a cow, which was killed and its vulva put round his neck as a collar and a visible sign of the name he bore ever after. This may be merely a folk etymology for a name which could not be explained, but it may be an ancient element which other storytellers have suppressed at least when they have told the story to outsiders. Narrators are more willing to admit a strong sexual element which is certainly present in the killing of Cumhall by Arca Dubh in revenge: Cumhall is killed, perhaps can only be killed, in bed as soon as he has consummated his marriage with the king of Lochlann's daughter, and thus begotten Fionn who is eventually to avenge him.<sup>68</sup> The symbolism of his death in that situation by his own sword in the hands of someone whose name means Black Vulva and who was hidden under the bed during the lovemaking could certainly be exploited by any Freudian, and the death of that killer by the same sword in the hands of the son who has acquired new potency from a fish (substituting for a snake?) fits the pattern almost as well.

The very last act of the cycle has no known literary prototype. This is the story of Oisín's last hunt, known in Scotland often by the proverbial phrase *Oisean an Déidh na Féinne*, 'Ossian After the Fenians [had Vanished]'; more prosaically referred to as 'Oisín and Patrick's Housekeeper' by Murphy

67 In the first recording he would not name the crime, later when he knew the fieldworkers better he was fairly explicit about the punishment, but only to an Italian student who could not understand him did he state plainly that Arca Dubh was 'making a bull of himself on the cow' (*a' dèanamh tarbh dhe fhéin air a' bhoín*).

68 So in printed Scottish versions in note 63 except *Leabhar na Féinne*; not very clear in *The Fians*, 24, different *ibid.*, 16.

in Ireland.<sup>69</sup> The situation is that established by the literary *Agallamh*, that Oisín (in this tale alone, without Caoilte) has survived his companions by many years and tells his story to St Patrick. A few Scottish versions provide an explanation rather different both from the well-known account in Micheál Cuimín's eighteenth-century lay of his visit with the beautiful Niamh to Tír na nÓg, 'The Land of the [Ever-]Young', or the Irish folktales in which he is otherwise tempted to Tír na hÓige, 'The Land of Youth'. Unlike Murphy,<sup>70</sup> I am prepared to believe that Cuimín first simplified the *Agallamh*'s vague account of Oisín and Caoilte spending unspecified numbers of years in various fairy hills in Ireland into a visit to an overseas otherworld. Of the elements he used, the fairy woman who invites a mortal to the overseas 'Earthly Paradise' is a literary motif no doubt with pagan antecedents which recurs from the Old Irish 'Voyage of Bran' onwards, and the idea that time passes more quickly in the otherworld is also in *Immram Brain* — at least the prose narration, which is not as remarkably early as the verse passages may be<sup>71</sup> — and still recurs in folk legend, though the 'Rip Van Winkle' type telling of a man caught up in a fairy dance, very widely known over the past century in Scotland, has parallels in Wales but seemingly none

69 Murphy, *op. cit.* (1953), xix-xx, with list of versions; S. Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, Dublin 1942, 593, No. 19, for summary; J.F. Campbell, *op. cit.* (1890-3), 2, 113-20 (versions from Barra, Sutherland and Argyll, referred to below as B, S, A); *op. cit.* (1872), 38-9 (Mull, 1803: 'M'); J.G. Campbell, *op. cit.*, 82-4 (Tiree? 'T'); *Tocher* 29 (1978), 292-301 (Sutherland/Ross, 'R'). Unpublished Scottish versions include Campbell of Islay Ms XVI, 147 (summary from Mull) and recordings in the School of Scottish Studies from Tiree, Arisaig, South Uist (2), and four more from Sutherland or Ross-shire travellers; some of these are cited below.

70 Murphy, *op. cit.* (1953), xxii-iii.

71 G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, Oxford 1956, 216, accepts an early eighth- or even seventh-century date for the verses in *Immram Brain*, which imply the story of the invitation. Tales like *Serglige Con Culainn*, the last of the types paralleled by fairy legends listed above, where the mortal is invited to help the otherworld host, have a distinct theme, but this may be involved in some traditions of Oisín.

in Ireland.<sup>72</sup> Cuimín may also have been inspired to some extent by the tales of dream visits to Heaven and Hell composed by Irish clerics in the Dark Ages and later,<sup>73</sup> which owe something to the pagan stories of a summons to the otherworld, or a Gaelic version of the related international folktale type AT 470, 'Friends in Life and Death'. In some Scottish versions of this a cleric is summoned to the otherworld by a skull he has spoken to and after visions of punishments there returns to earth to find that a hundred years or more have passed in what seemed an afternoon. Like Oisín he is warned not to dismount from his horse except on a special mat, but when he forgets the prohibition and touches the earth he does not only become an old man but crumbles into dust.<sup>74</sup> In Scotland the story is known in this form but never told of Oisean; in Ireland the ending is told of Oisín, whose entry into the otherworld may however be rather different from either AT 470 or Cuimín's lay.<sup>75</sup> It is still

72 See A. Bruford, 'Legends Long Since Localised . . .', *Scottish Studies* 24 (1980), 54-5.

73 St J.D. Seymour, *Irish Visions of the Other-World*, London 1930: the passing of time in such visions naturally tends to follow the reverse principle, that a long journey is over in one night.

74 C. Maclean, 'A' Ministear agus an Claban', *Scottish Studies* 1 (1957), 65-9, is the only Scottish Gaelic version I can cite complete with this ending. However, two other travellers with the same surname as the Alasdair Stewart who recorded the tale for Calum have recorded versions in Lowland Scots with this end, and a similar story with little account of otherworld punishments was popular in Shetland (C. Maclean, *Shetland Folk Book* III, 65-7; A. Bruford, *The Green Man of Knowledge . . .*, Aberdeen 1982, 68-71).

75 Oisín's journey to the Otherworld is listed by Ó Súilleabháin and Christiansen, *op. cit.* as AT 470\*, 'The Hero Visits the Land of the Immortals', but I have not seen any version of the skull type with a similar end from Ireland, where it is one of the less common international religious tales, possibly because the native type has taken over. Oisín is led into the Otherworld by a deer he chases, a bird that steals his ring (see n. 78 below), or even carried there on a funeral bier in versions printed in early numbers of *Béaloides* (1 [1927-8], 219; 2 [1929-30], 254 [1933-4], 191) but not simply invited by a beautiful fairy woman as in the lay. One Scottish account, J.G. Campbell, *op. cit.*, 80, says that Oisean was sent to Tìr na h-Oige.

quite possible that Cuimín first adapted the international type to explain Oisín's longevity, but that folktale tellers have sometimes rejected his too literary introduction; on the other hand he may have added this introduction to an existing folk tradition about Oisín. In either case there is no question of the tradition being very ancient, because it depends on the idea of Oisín's survival established by the *Agallamh*, and though that has reached Scotland this explanation has not. Indeed there is no reason in oral tradition why the Fenians and St Patrick should not have been near-contemporaries; only a literary person who knew there were six generations between Cormac and Laoghaire in the genealogies or two hundred years between them in the pseudo-historical annals would find any difficulty in making Oisín survive to Patrick's time.

Most Scottish versions of the tale in fact do not bother to explain Oisean's longevity, but simply represent him as an aged man living in the house of Patrick, who is often represented as married to Oisean's daughter! (Even in Catholic areas of Scotland St Patrick has travelled less well than the Fenians: he may be represented as having the tithes (*càin*) of all Ireland, but Campbell of Islay's translation of him into 'Peter Mac Alpin' probably shows how little knowledge of him the average Argyll Gael in his day would have had.<sup>76</sup>) A version of the story recorded from two Sutherland travellers called Alasdair Stewart, Aili Dall or Blind Sandy and his nephew known as Brian,<sup>77</sup> does however explain Oisean's long life by the gift of a magic ring from the fairy wife he once had. She is nothing like Cuimín's Niamh, but belongs to a well-established group of fairy wives who impose conditions on their husbands and leave them when these are broken.<sup>78</sup> Oisean was visited by her in the form of a crow

76 J.F. Campbell, *op. cit.* (1872), 38, summarising the book-burning story below as heard 'over and over again, in Scotland'. *Pàdruig* is almost always Englished as Peter if it is the name of a Scottish Gael, and Mac Alpin is not far from St Patrick's traditional patronymic *mac Calpruinn*, son of Calpurnius.

77 SA 1958/73 A11; SA 1958/72 A13-B1 and Linguistic Survey Tape 965 (=R).

78 See T.F. O'Rahilly, *Gadelica* I (1913), 282; Bruford, *op. cit.* (1969), 134-5.

and broke her enchantment by spending a night with her, but he is not to mention in what form he first saw her. He is enraged when she sells a puppy he wanted to keep and calls her 'you black crow' (*o, fheannag dhubh*), on which she flies off in that form, but gives him the ring and tells him he will live as long as he keeps it on his finger. At the end Oisean's attendant is washing the old man in a stream and takes the ring off his finger: a crow carries it off and Oisean goes home — after killing the attendant — and dies.<sup>79</sup> The story may well have a long history, for a rather garbled version of it is in the Mull manuscript of 1803 mentioned above,<sup>80</sup> and is quite as well in tune with Gaelic fairy traditions as the invitation to Tír na nÓg which it replaces in Scotland.

The story that follows in Scottish versions serves to explain why today's Fenian lore seems so fragmentary and confused: Campbell of Islay calls it an allegory of the Ossianic controversy.<sup>81</sup> Once more the written text is taken as the authority. Patrick himself has been writing down Oisean's tales, but he cannot believe them all — in the tradition of the flying dialogues which introduce some of the ballads. When the fine haunch of a deer that the saint shows his father-in-

79 This is 'Brian's' version (R), learned from his grandmother, and seems slightly more appropriate to this tale than the variant told by Aili Dall and his daughter Mary (SA 1957/48 B2) who agree in making the woman appear as an ugly woman, who becomes beautiful after a night with Oisean — a motif told of fairy or divine figures in Gaelic lore too often to need a parallel cited — and only turns into a raven (which later steals the ring) when he reproaches her with her former ugliness.

80 M (see note 69): a raven steals the ring, which keeps Oisín from dying or going blind, and the blind old man finds it again when his grandson, Patrick's son, lets him fall over a cliff — presumably to get rid of the old nuisance! — after the blackbird hunt. In a story from Co. Sligo, *Béalóideas* 2 (1929-30), 254, a bird steals the ring which preserves Oisín from hunger, to make him follow it to his fairy mother's home in Tír na hÓige. It may be relevant that a 'Ring of Youth', *Fáinne na hÓige*, often appears in Irish tales both as a magic object and a princess's name.

81 J.F. Campbell, *op. cit.* (1890-3), 2, 118 — 'Oisian, MacPherson, Dr Smith, and their party, fused into "Ossian", Dr Johnson, and his followers, condensed into "Padraig!"'.

law provokes the response that Oisean has seen a blackbird's leg bigger than that, Patrick flies in a rage and throws the books of the old man's lies in the fire: his daughter rescues them, but much has been lost for ever.<sup>82</sup> Whoever made up this story was no ignorant peasant: he may not have been literate, but he knew that Fenian lore was in books (manuscripts rather than print, since the story was certainly well established before 1800) and had discussed it enough with his contemporaries to know there were gaps and discrepancies in the stories. It is not usually stated that Oisean was a giant himself, though he may still have been very strong,<sup>83</sup> but perhaps he had shrunk along with the rest of the world. At any rate the proof of his veracity recalls Conan Doyle's 'Lost World' of dinosaurs — I wonder if Doyle knew of it? — though perhaps the real meaning of the tale is that it is bad manners to accuse a storyteller of exaggerating, and Patrick is in effect taught a lesson like 'the man who had no story'.<sup>84</sup>

The Irish versions of the story are more in the burlesque giant-tale tradition: they emphasise Oisín's enormous appetite, though even Scottish versions mention how he 'had to wear a

82 This seems the most logical, and is R's account, except that the girl seems to be Patrick's daughter rather than Oisean's; but most versions in fact choose one of two different options — (1) Oisean himself burns the books and his daughter saves some (B; Angus MacLellan, S. Uist, SA 1963/13 B2); or (2) Patrick burns them but later repents (and saves some, Aili Dall; too late, T; Mrs Peggy MacDonald, Angus MacLellan's sister, SA 1959/58 B1). In M, the earliest version, there is another twist which those concerned with saving family papers may find the most likely of all — Oisean's daughter throws her father's tales in the fire, and the others can only save a little.

83 S, contributed in English, calls Oisean 'the last of the giants' (and no other name) which suggests that someone telling the story in English translated *Féinn* as 'giants'; references to him as a giant in A, summarised next, may be due to Campbell himself. Oisean's strength is most stressed in T and the modern Tíree version told by Donald Sinclair (SA 1960/70 A, SA 1958/2/6) where he lifts a stone sixteen builders could not.

84 Listed by Ó Súilleabháin and Christiansen, *op. cit.*, as AT 2412B: a man with no story to tell has strange, usually horrific experiences soon after and is told at the end 'now you have a story'.

hunger-belt' or had his belly pinned together with skewers.<sup>85</sup> St Patrick's housekeeper (he is clearly thought of in terms of the parish priest) thinks she is generous in offering the hero a quarter of an ox, the butter of a whole churning, and an out-size oatcake for each meal. The blackbird's leg is to be bigger than the beef, a rowan berry than the lump of butter, an ivy leaf than the bannock<sup>86</sup> — a contrast of wild nature and the farm rather than a comparison of foods. But what follows is clearly the same story: finding the leaf and berry is peculiar to the Irish variant and appeasing Oisean's hunger in the field with venison<sup>87</sup> to the Scottish. Otherwise the same elements are there: the boy to help the (often blind) old hero, the special dog to kill the game, the hole in the ground and the whistle or horn (*Barra-Buadh*) blown to summon big and then yet bigger game, and the dog which has to be killed through its gaping mouth before it turns its blood-lust on

85 Belt, M, S; skewers, B, T; in the latter he asks for the 16 men's food to do their work.

86 Based on Ó Súilleabháin, *op. cit.*, and versions this may follow — *Béalóideas* 2 (1929-30), 65-7, 256-7; *ibid.* 5 (1915), 292-3; also *Choice Notes from 'Notes and Queries', Folklore*, London 1859, 103-4, from Co. Clare; J. Curtin, *Myths and Folklore of Ireland*, Boston 1890, 337-42. Rather garbled in P. Kennedy's *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, London 1866, 240-2, where a lark's leg is bigger than a shoulder of mutton and 'the berry of the wild ash . . . as large as a sheep' — surely a mistranslation. In Scotland S and a Wester Ross traveller's recording (SA 1957/26-27, which turns Patrick into a cattle-reiver!) speak of beef rather than venison, as in the Irish versions.

87 The deer may just allow Oisean to let out his belt (one or more are cooked, usually boiled in a cauldron but sometimes (R, S) roasted on a camp fire) but the meal may also renew his youth (M), or restore his sight and hearing (T, R). In T he apparently vanishes into the woods and is never seen again: his grandson brings back the bone. But in R the boy (here just a servant) tastes the meat first and leaves a mark on Oisean's eye — an echo of Fionn and the salmon at the other end of the cycle? In A it is worse and he remains blind, but 'if he had eaten all he could have recovered his sight'. In M he would have been as good as new if the boy had not taken some, and seems to be blind until he finds his ring; in S and B he evidently stays blind, and in the latter he is angry with the boy for eating three of the nine stags.

the hunters.<sup>88</sup> The Irish details are more logical — the hound is chosen for its grip as a puppy and the horn found buried in the pit summons the great blackbird which the hound kills — the Scottish more mysterious — the hound is a survivor of the Fenians, itself sometimes found buried under a clump of rushes, with a name that recalls the blackbird's yellow bill;<sup>89</sup> the hole may be dug to protect the boy's ears from the ear-splitting whistle;<sup>90</sup> and the dog kills the deer it summons to feed Oisean, while the blackbird is found and killed later, usually with an arrow.<sup>91</sup> But there is enough in common to create a strong presumption that the story was known, in some form, whether 'folk', oral literary or even written, before

- 88 In Scotland Oisean kills it by putting a hand down its throat (B, M) with which he takes out its liver and lungs (T); in Ireland he throws a metal ball or stone down its throat usually. Both methods are common in Gaelic tales, and the second at least derives ultimately from Cú Chulainn's killing of the hound which gave him his name.
- 89 Biorach-Mac-Buidheag M, Biorach mac Buidheig T, Mac Buidheig B, (phonetically) 'cue baie mac kill e buiach' A, Biorach a' Bhuidheag R: *biorach*, 'sharp', is in three and *buidhe*, 'yellow' in all. Note that Fionn's own hound is called Bran mac Buidheag in a version of the boyhood deeds (J.F. Campbell, *op. cit.* [1890-3], 3, 351-3). The dog is found under a clump of rushes — A, R; Oisean wishes for the worst dog of the Fenians — M, B, T — and knows it has come when he feels its weight lying on his legs — M, B.
- 90 In Irish versions the *Barra-Buadh* or some sort of horn or whistle is buried in the pit; in M it is Fionn's cauldron that is dug up to cook the deer, in B and T likewise a cauldron is dug up; but in R after digging up the dog, and in A 'firelocks and spades' as well, the boy has to dig a hole and put his head in it while Oisean whistles (A) or shouts loudly (R). M also makes him shout, but T and B like Irish versions give him an instrument to whistle on — a whistle from his pocket in B, the blackbird's bone itself in T, where the boy is told to put his fingers in his ears.
- 91 Blackbird killed with an arrow in S (where three flights of birds of increasing size replace the different sizes of deer, so this is like the Irish versions) by Oisean's hand guided by the boy; later, by Oisean after he has recovered his sight in R; by the boy (with a firelock?) in A. In the other versions Oisean simply finds a blackbird chick in a hole in a rock (B), or just pulls out the leg-bone from the hole (M, T). In some Scottish versions the boy, not here a relative but a



the links between the two countries were broken in the seventeenth century. It has the character of a folktale, but it manages to incorporate a good deal of magic and mystery beside the burlesque, and it would have no meaning without the literary cycle to which it supplies the final chapter.

The different classes of tradition are inextricably interwoven, and this is surely one way in which *fiannaíocht* and a great deal of other Gaelic storytelling is quite different from that of most other parts of Europe.

servant, is killed to prevent him telling of the mysteries he has seen, by Oisean before he gets home (B), after he has lost his ring (R), or apparently by the rest of the household next day (A): perhaps he is also killed because of the power he has got from eating the deer. In B, as in T, the servant is one of the Fenians' attendants, wished for along with the dog, with a 'red' name (Mac na Ruaghadh, Tòn Ruadh!).